

On Saturday, June 22, 2019 I was.... sitting in one of these pews. It was my first time worshipping at Grace UMC. Earlier that day I was interviewed for the position of Director of Children's Ministry. I had just recently learned about Grace UMC and as I sat in that pew, my mind was full of the possibilities of what life here could look like. Coincidentally, it was VBS weekend. Kids were in the front singing and dancing, there was a montage of pictures from the previous week, and I thought: if I get hired these are the kids that I will work with. These are the families whose names I will know, their kitchen tables I will sit and eat at, and people who I will create memories with.

And sitting in the pew, before I was even offered the job, I began brainstorming what VBS would look like next year. What I would give to go back to Saturday, June 22, 2019 and pat naive, ambitious, Angela on the back.

I am standing here, giving this sermon, because I did get hired. And this is the weekend I daydreamed about a year ago. However, Vacation Bible School is nothing like how I envisioned. No one in June 2019 could have predicted what June 2020 was going to be like.

Our scripture today is Psalm 126. To me, this is a Psalm about time. You may not notice it at first, but I see this psalm being about the past, the present, and the future.

“When the Lord gave the riches back to Jerusalem,
it seemed as if we were dreaming.

Then we were filled with laughter,
and we sang happy songs.

Then the other nations said,

“The Lord has done great things for them.”

The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are very glad.”

“Then, then, then.” The people are reflecting. God, you were with us -- then.

God was at VBS a year ago. I saw it in the faces of the children singing and dancing, in the video montage, in how people spoke about all that happened at VBS that week.

God, you were with us -- then.

These last few months have been a time of wondering God, where are you now? Is God only in our church? Was God only with us then? Is God with us here? Is God with us now?

A year ago, I imagined planning VBS in a meeting room, at a table surrounded by eagerly energized volunteers ready to create a week of worship. But I planned VBS, sitting alone in my apartment asking the same question we all were, “God. Where are you?”

Our VBS theme this year -- God @ Home asks this question. We shared 4 stories in the Bible that aren't often discussed. The stories of four women who were strong, and full of courage, and asked the same question we are asking now: God, are you here as well?

The first week of VBS was the story of Miraim -- the Israelite woman who grew up in Egypt and helped lead her people into freedom. She asked, God, you were with us in Egypt. Are you with us in this new place as well? The second week was the story of Hulduh -- the woman who loved the word of God and helped turn the Israelites back to God after they had forgotten. She asked, God you were with the Israelites before, are you also with them now? The third week was the story of Rizpah -- the woman whose two sons she spent her life protecting were murdered. She asked, “God you were with me with everything was safe, are you with me now? As I protect other sons?” This

upcoming Tuesday, is the story of Hagar -- the woman who had a son and was abandoned by everyone except God. She asked, "God, you were with Abraham and Sarah, are you with me too?"

Our four VBS stories begin the same way our Psalm does, the same place where we are: God. You were with us then. Are you with us now?

It's strange asking people how they're doing. You no longer hear the response, "Good, how are you?"

Psalm 126 shifts from remembering God in the past, to weeping about the struggle in the present.

They cry as they plant crops. They cry and carry the seeds. They weep as they sow a garden.

Our VBS stories were also full of weeping. Miriam weeping at the oppression of the Egyptians. Hulduh weeping at the people forgetting God. Rizpah weeping at the deaths of her sons. Hagar weeping at the brutality and abandonment she experienced.

Now when we ask one another, how are you? If you listen closely enough, we hear the weeping.

Weeping of small business owners not knowing how they will financially recover.

Weeping of exhausted parents trying to work from home and be with their children without any break.

Weeping of elders who are separated from their loved ones.

Weeping of families of people who work in law enforcement worrying about their safety.

Weeping of people whose income is insecure as they watch their bills pile and wonder if they will be evicted.

Weeping of inmates who are stripped of the few things that brought them joy -- classes, volunteers, and visitations.

Weeping of teachers who poured out so much work last semester and frustratingly wondering how they will teach this semester.

Weeping of Black and brown people wondering if their names would be memorialized as a hashtag like Breonna Taylor, Drejon Reed, Elijah McClain, Tamir Rice?

Weeping of people sitting behind screens while they argue with their relatives, friends, and coworkers on social media.

Weeping of people who are single or widowed feeling the weight of isolation

Weeping of students missing milestones -- graduations, proms, competitions, tournaments.

I wonder what has caused your weeping?

I wept when a piece of fabric worn to protect one another became politicized.

I wept at the seemingly acceptance of 120,000 Americans dying.

I wept thinking about George Floyd's last moments on the concrete as he was desperately searching for help in a crowd of people, but only seeing cell phones recording his death.

My breaking point was last Friday night as I volunteered in a tent city in Indy. A little girl I'd been playing with asked, "Are you sleeping here tonight too?" That night I slept in my bed while her and her mom were on that park bench.

I am not a person who cries, but my eyes have begun welcoming kleenexes as their new friend.

What does street corner preachers, Facebook memes, and YouTube conspiracy videos all have in common? They love shouting out “The apocalypse is near!” And their kind of right. Well, actually very wrong, but unintentionally right. In Biblical Studies, the word apocalypse means “to unmask” and “reveal hidden truths.” Yeah, 2020 is an apocalypse. It’s not the end of the world. It’s the year that everything is being unmasked and the hidden truths of our broken and oppressive systems are being revealed.

Those who cry as they plant crops
will sing at harvest time.

Those who cry
as they carry out the seeds
will return singing
and carrying bundles of grain.

Psalm 126 shifts from remembering God in the past, to weeping about the struggle in the present, to doing the work for a different future -- planting a garden.

I read this passage and think, oh God. I love gardening, but I am tired, my eyes are burning, and my face is puffy. Did you miss the last part where we’re all weeping?

Weeping about systemic racism, bankrupting health care, fractured housing. Weeping for the values and idols that have been placed on pedestals, but that I don’t see the reflection of Jesus in.

God hears the weeping, and is with us. Our weeping isn’t avoided, it isn’t asked to quiet down, we aren’t told “everything is going to be okay.” No the tears of the weeping are

the fuel for a new creation. God is at work restoring all the brokenness, and we help by carrying seeds, planting crops, and imagining a new garden.

And if 2020 is a garden, it's one that has recently been tilled. It's a garden where the weeds can no longer hide, and the soil is raw and exposed. 2020 is a garden ready for some seeds. Carry those seeds in our time of weeping.

I wonder what are the weeds? I wonder what's causing the weeping? I wonder what a new garden looks like?

I've heard this year be described as the year of brokenness. But there are still 6 months in this year left, and it can become the year of healing and making things whole.

This is the time to plant a garden. Garden that replaces the harmful weeds with nourishing crops, a garden that is not overrun with ugliness but is blooming with beauty, a garden that is cared for and well thought out, a garden that is good for the community.

Our VBS stories, like our Psalm, is in three parts. First: the people asked where is God, then: they wept, and finally: in their weeping they sowed the seeds of the kingdom of God. Miriam led the Israelites in singing and dancing, Huldah helped the people turn back to God, Rizpah demanded justice and the king repented, and Hagar gave God a name and God made Hagar a promise.

Even with our stuffed up noses, pockets full of used kleenexes, and a good after crying headache, let us keep sowing the seeds of God's kingdom. Dig a hole for love, peace, compassion and empathy. Bury deeply the seeds of self-control, gentleness, critical thinking and contemplation. Nourish the seeds of joy, and play, and kindness. Plant seeds of dialogue instead of debate. Scatter seeds that grow conversations centered around listening and understanding rather than winning and diminishing opponents.

This new garden has many gentle caretakers. To sow this garden, grandparents must listen to our grandkids and grandkids must listen to your grandparents. We sow this garden with our neighbors, and never alone. We begin planting the seeds by acknowledging that while we may not be experiencing the sufferings of the world directly, the sufferings are still wrong and we should fix them. We sow this garden by listening to our weeping community.

Thomas King is an indigenous author who wrote the book, *The Truth about Stories* -- it examines how stories shape us and our culture. He had this to say about listening to the stories of others: "It's yours now. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now."

There are gardeners ready to dig their hands in some soil sitting in these pews, worshipping at home.

Seeds are being planted right now in this church. I see the seeds of a beautiful garden each week when I talk with the kids and they excitedly tell me where they saw God that week. I see this new garden on Thursday mornings at Jenothy's book study where women are asking challenging questions and understanding God in new ways. This garden is happening on the youth ministry's YouTube channel where teens are sharing videos teaching other teens a new skill.

Seeds are planted by the innovation of Jenny Beck as she leads the care ministry.

Seeds are being planted by Beth Stillabowwer building bridges in our community. Seeds with strong roots in the perseverance of Sandy Adams and Laura Bowman who kept our offices operating these last few months.

God was with us then last year at VBS weekend. God is with us now in our time of weeping. And God is ready to get on their hands and knees and dig into some soil alongside us.

When the Lord gave the riches back to Jerusalem,
it seemed as if we were dreaming.

Then we were filled with laughter,
and we sang happy songs.

Then the other nations said
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are very glad.

Lord, give us back our riches again.
Do this as you bring streams to the desert.

Those who cry as they plant crops
will sing at harvest time.

Those who cry
as they carry out the seeds
will return singing and carrying bundles of grain.

This is the word of God, for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.